

The Arts: Visual Art, Music, Dance, Drama

There's an old puzzle that goes: "What part of the blanket keeps you warm at night?" The correct answer is, "the part that hangs over the side." Get it? Most people immediately assume that the part that keeps you warm is the part that's directly covering you. But what happens if your blanket is just the size of the top of your bed? It slides off, right? And then you're freezing. In other words, it is the "extra" part of the blanket that makes the whole thing work.

If you haven't heard this little parable, that's because it is most frequently told by arts educators, and no one is listening to them these days.

The arts have long led a marginal existence in American schools, but today their role in our children's education is more tenuous than ever. During especially hard times of budget cuts and focus on tests in "core" content areas, art can all but disappear from some schools, treated as an unnecessary frill—just like all that "wasted" blanket hanging over the bed.

As we explain in our section on representing learning, students urgently need opportunities to think about subject matter in a wide variety of modes—and they also need many ways to show what they have learned, later on. The arts provide a grand toolbox of ways for both building knowledge and sharing it. Here are some of the key principles.

Let Kids Do Art

From the earliest preschool years, children have a powerful urge to make art. We don't have to "assign" children to draw with markers, chant jump-rope rhymes, share dramatic monologues, make theatrical faces, or dance. Artistic expression seems to be wired into children's genes. Therefore, the first job of teachers and other adults is to get out of the way and let kids express and experiment. We need to provide tools, materials, equipment, models, examples, coaching, and plenty of time.

Integrate the Arts Across the Curriculum

There are infinite opportunities for weaving artistic thinking and expression into all subject areas. Students who are reading a novel can show their understanding by illustrating critical scenes, acting them out, translating them into movement and dance, or creating background music for them. Ideally, the arts take a central place in broad, integrative projects that teachers and students plan together and that extend over long chunks of time. In every subject, the arts can provide new ways of exploring and expressing ideas about practically anything—the Civil War, triangles, photosynthesis, or *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Use the Arts to Advance Thinking

Students should regularly use art as a tool for the exploration of ideas. These informal, tentative, exploratory applications can help kids engage and grapple with ideas in any subject area. For example, teachers often ask students to keep a learning log in which they write notes about their learning. Instead, teachers can have students keep a sketchbook, where they can still jot words—or sketch pictures, make diagrams, map ideas, or create unique combinations of words and graphic elements in response to class activities.

Bring Artists into the Classroom

There's something special and different about people who make their livelihoods as musicians, videomakers, dancers, actors, sculptors, artists, poets, web game designers, storytellers, or painters. They can make unique, sometimes magical, connections with young people and provide knowledge, motivation, and inspiration to growing artists.

Therefore, children need chances to meet, observe, and work with adult artists in their school. While one-shot performances and traditional residencies are helpful, even better are genuine long-term partnerships between the school and community arts organizations, providing sustained, intensive arts experiences for children, coplanned with the regular teachers and integrated into the school's overall curriculum. This model transforms the artist from a transient celebrity to a long-term consultant and deeply involves the classroom teacher as a coartist as well.

